

This was the final project for the Ethnomusicology 20C (Musical Cultures of the World: Asia) course, taught by Professor Katherine In-Young Lee in Fall 2020 at UCLA. Students worked in groups to research and conduct an oral history with one of seven musicians who also served as a guest lecturer for the course. Each of the narrators are highly esteemed musicians with long professional careers in music performance. They also serve as important liaisons between their home countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the United States.

Profile of Vân-Ánh Võ

A fearless musical explorer, Vân-Ánh Võ is an award-winning performer of the 16-string đàn tranh (zither) and a master of the monochord (đàn bầu), bamboo xylophone (đàn t'rung), and the traditional drums (trống). Vân-Ánh's strong foundation in traditional Vietnamese music allows her to create modern arrangements of traditional compositions and to fuse the wonderfully unique sounds of her instruments with other genres such as hip-hop, rap, and jazz. She believes that collaborating with artists from cultures other than Vietnam enriches her own musical journey as she strives to understand other musical traditions as much as possible. She is an Emmy Award-winning composer who has collaborated with Kronos Quartet, Alonzo King LINES Ballet, and Yo-Yo Ma. Her group, Blood Moon Orchestra, is a perfect example of a melting pot of musical genres, as its members range from rappers to experimental and folk musicians.

Vân-Ánh is also very active in teaching her community and audience members about Vietnamese musical traditions before her performances. This includes community workshops, and she also brings Vietnamese food with her to expose the community to as much Vietnamese culture as possible. Her workshops are meant to engage participants in whichever topic that has inspired Vân-Ánh's productions. Vân-Ánh was also the first Vietnamese artist to perform at the White House and received the Artist Laureate Award for her aforementioned community contributions with her music.

Oral History Interview Transcript: Vân-Ánh Võ

Steve Murillo: Hello, my name is Steve Murillo.

Ariana Wallfred: I'm Ariana Wallfred.

SM: And we are recording the interview via Zoom and we are both in Los Angeles, California. Today's date is November 30th and it is now 3:05pm and we will be interviewing the wonderfully talented Vân-Ánh Võ who is residing in Fremont, California.

Hello. Thank you so much for being a part of this interview, we're very grateful to have you here today and let's just go ahead and get started. We have some questions for you and we're very looking forward to hearing your responses.

Vân-Ánh Võ: This is my pleasure to be here today to share what I know about the traditional-- Vietnamese traditional music and Global Music in general.

1:07

SM: That's awesome, thank you so much. So our first question for today: A big topic we studied in our class was the concept of "traditions and transformations" which begged the question: Does cross-cultural music have a positive or negative impact on one's culture and... on music in general? As an artist who has performed with so many different musicians and that has such a strong foundation in the Vietnamese music tradition, do you think that cross-cultural music is always a good thing, or does it sometimes coincide with cultural appropriation?

VV: As a musician well trained in traditional Vietnamese music and also learned music notation and music history even from...Western classical music and world music and now I am living in America. I totally think that cross-cultural music is a good thing. It brings people together, it share cultures, it's helps people to understand the differences of different cultures, and from there we can appreciate each other more. In the process of exchanging and doing the cross culture, yes there's sometime it can be a little bit more, um, negative if you see that it's only happen when the artist or the people do not understand deep enough and jump into working on something that does not have a good base to base on, but for me have been, personally, I have been working with many different artists from different cultures. I, um, I am fortunate and also lucky to be able to meet with great artists, master artists, and, um, master of their tradition and also with them and with their knowledge of those master artists I be able to understand well and I be able to, to learn and also I...I am able to share the culture that I come from. And if when I do not have that kind of deep understanding of someone's other culture, I head out to do the research for, for it to understand more to speak to more people than just the artists to understand the...the life, the culture behind it because culture doesn't come just by music and art, it comes from the language, from the food, and you know, even the way of doing and managing one's life - daily life - so I head out to understand their perspectives in order to work with the master artists from other cultures. So to me, cross-cultural music and art bring more happy, happiness, bring more understanding, bring more positive things than anything else.

4:42

SM: That's amazing, I love that cause I also agree and I just want to tell you, your collaboration with your group the Blood Moon Orchestra is is super awesome cuz it's got like, it's got hip hop, it's got rap in there, and your song "Moving Train" I've been listening to that on repeat, it's such a great song.

VV: Thank you, thank you very much.

SM: And I just want to ask you, so how did that collaboration come to be and what are your experiences from that?

VV: Yeah, so... I always want to take Vietnamese traditional music or art music, that's what I'm doing now, to collaborate, to share, to influence and be influenced by other music genres and cultures and artists and so that's why it's...that's why...maybe my desire takes me to collaborate, you know, collaboration with other artists of other different music genres. And so that includes that I want, I want to collaborate with hip hop artists, with breakdance artists, and you know, rock players or jazz artists and, you know, you name it. But then talking about traditional music, or even art music that I am doing now, because I include not only the music, traditional music in my work, but I include literature, even political issue, community issues and everything in that so

it become more Vietnamese art music that I'm doing. And, but then from there, and you know I would say that hip-hop and breakdancing are way on the other side of the equation that I don't know when and how I can reach it. So, um, but then I keep doing what I think I believe that is the right thing to do and my, you know...my curiosities, my desire to learn more and do more. Then it took me to meet with great artists. You know, that now in my group, Blood Moon Orchestra and it is, it took about 7 years for me to actually achieve that. So that's why I...and also it took me that long to find the right artist to work with because I also have to meet with artists who have the same mind like me, who wants to reach out and want to collaborate, who want to experiment and open to possibilities and, and who are not afraid of doing something new even though it sounds crazy at first. So...so that's when I meet with that, you know, right artists that I can work with and collaborate with. I named my group Blood Moon Orchestra because I think that the phenomenon of nature, the phenomenon of blood moon only happen when the earth, sun, and moon are all lined up together, then the blood moon happens. So so I think that when I meet the right artist, rapper Dem One, Demone Carters, and breakdancers, and also ballet dancer, Tunji Johnson, and a lot of more artists around me in the Blood Moon Orchestra, like Iranian singer, Mahsa Vahdat, and Turkish musician on oud and tar hu, Gari Hegedus, and electric marimba. You name it. It's all very unique and come from different cultures and all of us be able to sit down and work and enjoy what we really share and learn from each other. So, I think that that is uh...it has to be something so special that it's just like the blood moon happen only when, again, the earth, the sun, and the moon all line up together. So that is my Blood Moon Orchestra.

SM: Wow. That is so cool.

VV: Thank you.

9:45

SM: Yeah, and going off of what you're saying about your passion for learning, and everyone who you work with should be able to, you know, know some information and what they're playing and who they're playing with. Um, in connection to that, your bio also mentions that your productions often include a community...component leading up to your performances to further engage participants. So what's that like and what are some of the activities you've done in the past? And is every workshop similar, or completely different based on the music you'll be performing?

VV: Yes. So um to me when I do music there are the three main things that I have to do. One is to write music that really have to share what I...feel and what I think about people around me, to express my feelings. Secondly I perform. And the third thing that I do is to teach, to teach so that you know, in teaching I can not only be able to share with younger generation but also have the generation, um, share with them what I know so that they can continue to carry on the tradition and you know the, to preserve and also develop the traditional art. And so because of that, whenever I do whatever the production or project that I do, I always treasure two part: one is the workshop for communities and voice of communities, and one is that to share that what I learned from the community with the concert-goer. Um, each production would be very different but it's all, it all start on one important thing is that I, I believe that we all have similar experiences in life, but because of our different background, our different families that we were born from, we view those same topic and we experience the same topic in a very different way. And so I, I love

to learn how other people think about, let's say even like this is one example when I work with the Japanese pianist, Motoko Honda and then we work on the...music that you know is a... long piece of music 45 minutes, that the first movement is to recall the rain sound of our each hometown. And so when I, when we first met to start to rehearse and share the idea and then Motoko told me that okay she would go first, and then she did beautiful thing on her piano, her prepared piano. And I'm enjoying and then I wait, and I wait, and I wait, and I feel like I still did not hear the rain. And then after that she's done and then she asked me, "What do you think?" and I'm like, really you're done? And then, um, so she says yes and then oh my gosh, then...okay, so now I share with you this is how rain will be like in Vietnam. And then I start to play on my instrument and she's just like [*gasps/gestures surprise*] and because you know like we have typhoon in Vietnam every summer! And then we talk about summer in Japan in the town that she, she came from is very, you know, the rain that she expresses is just like just very [*gestures: mimicking gentle rain*]. I didn't really feel it. And then when I express the rain that I have in, you know, in my hometown she's just like, "Oh my goodness, is it just like this?!" So, so you know, so the experience that we have is so different so that's why I think that when I have a project that talk about the experience of us as a community I should head out, interview and understand how people feel it and then I find ways to include it into my project so that it's become not only just whatever I feel but it's more of the community of people who are around me. Um, so that is one way that I do to include community component in my work.

14:47

But, one more special... one more special aspect and component that I do is that I do a lot of workshop. I do workshop like I share how the music is done, how I do the research and how the...the sound of different instruments from different cultures...you know...sound like. Because in that process I think it's not only because for us, for the my group to share what we do, but also we as a bridge that we as a people who build bridges for community's members to learn, to pass whatever they feel like maybe a river in front of them, they know that something's very interesting on the other side, but there's no river, I'm sorry, there's no bridge so I don't think that anyone wants to jump down and swim over, you know, the river when one click they can have a ton of thing on the internet, you know? So, if we can use our music and instruments and the sound, and what we do and share in a very intimate kind of setting, not a concert setting because there audience and people cannot really ask the artist, they cannot even touch the instrument, they cannot even try to play on our instrument, but in our workshop they can do all that. We even teach them how to, um, build the instruments from things that they find around the house and they...can you know, understand how things go in music and we encourage them and tell them that they don't need to worry about, they have to have a talent in music and art to play an instrument. It's mainly because it come from here, from their heart, and that's the most important thing. So, that's why I really like and focus equally on the workshop, on working with community, on include finding way to...to find way to include community member's voices and then to present, so that I can, we can share more to people in different ways.

17:16

SM: So, am I correct in saying that you really... enjoy your audience being from all over the world, like different kinds of people just so they can hear, you know, something that they've never heard before?

VV: Yes, correct. I have to say that myself, especially and my ensemble all very, very much enjoy the workshop, the performance, the project but then we *[are]* even happier when we see the audience come and then they learn at the workshop across at the concert hall. But then it's so rewarding when I have young audience came to me and said that oh now they understood why their parents or grandparents forced them to learn something very traditional, and they hate it. But then, but then now because what I present, the way we presented it, help them to understand that everything has its root. But then what that root grows from, and now it's bloomed in the culture, in the environment that they are at, then it will change. That the root is still there but it does adapt with the, you know, with the new heartbeat of the time or the century that we are living in. So, and then the parents also, and grandparents, came to me and said that now they understood why their children love hip hop or rap or you know, because they see that now, they still see that what I do still has a root. But then it somehow trigger the...curiosity of the children so that...they're very happy to see that...that you know, old or young generation of audience who came to my concert so far, everyone were very happy because they see what they want and what they're looking for, and they learn new thing too.

19:48

SM: Wow, that's great. So now I'd like to ask you a more personal musical question in terms of your expression whenever you play and sing. So, you compose instrumental music as well as music that includes lyrics. How do you decide when to use lyrics when trying to convey a certain message as opposed to just using instruments that essentially do the same thing? How does your experience differ when you sing and play your instrument at the same time? And for instrumental music, do you turn to specific instruments to convey specific emotions?

VV: Um, okay, this is a very long, big question, so many things there...

SM: Oh, sorry about that.

VV: But I think the main thing here is that I always...when I write music, I actually think of all the instruments including the voice as an instrument. Each of them bring different color, and each of them has a way to help me to express my emotion. So that's why I don't really set out for, I'm going to write a song with lyric, or I'm going to...write just an instrumental piece of music or I should write a song but vocal which means it doesn't have words. I just write it out. As a composer, I have to let the music out first and there's times that I just wake up in the middle of the night and my husband like, "Where are you going?" I say, it is in here and I cannot sleep. I need to let it out first. And then, okay (laughs). So, I let it out and then after that I look into the, listen to the music again, and I look into it and I say that oh maybe this instrument or the vocal, or the vocal with words will help me to express my emotion about that subject or at that time more than another instruments or another way. So, so yeah, so I think that I...I try to not to have a favorite... you know a favorite instrument because I feel like that I'm not...I will be unfair when doing that, but what I do is that I look for the sound that, that actually express the emotion of the piece that I write rather than choosing that specific instrument to write for.

22:28

SM: So it's very flowy, you know, it's very much in the moment.

VV: Yes, yes. And then also yeah of course and then I will add more colors and more, more voices. So, it can be the human voice, it can be words that can be, not singing, but reading [*narration*] and you know that if you know my music I rarely...I don't think that I ever sing in English. I only sing in Vietnamese, but then I...if I sing, if the song's in Vietnamese I make sure that my facial expression, my way of playing the instrument, everything will have to support the message of the song to carry, to send the message of the song to the non-Vietnamese speaking audience. And I try that, I test that I test with my own daughters, and then, to see if they understood. And then I test with my students to see if they understand, and I test with people who don't know Vietnamese to see if they understand, so, to make sure that I have a way to help non-Vietnamese speaking audience understand what I, what I want to tell. So, in that perspective I think that word or no word doesn't really matter much. I think it's still like if I feel that I want to have the words and I put in if it helps to express, otherwise I just go for the sound that I'm looking for.

SM: Wow, I'm going to have to take some tips from you.

VV: You're welcome.

24:28

SM: Also I'm very curious when you come up with these new songs, like you say sometimes they just come to you out of nowhere. How do you...do you notate it on paper do you record yourself? What's your process?

VV: It is very different ways, there are very different ways I do... I do it. Sometime I just hum it and then you know with the technology of iPhone it helps me a lot recently. So sometime I just hum it and then record it. Sometime I just, you know, like jot down on the paper. Sometime I play on the instruments. It's just different what...whatever comes, then I do it.

25:19

SM: Wow. So...both of us are also very curious because we love your music and we just wanted to know...what...what does playing Vietnamese music mean to you?

VV: Well, I...at the very beginning I said that I was well trained in traditional music. I'm actually very...I'm very fortunate to, to be accepted as an apprentice under six different Master musicians for different music genres in Vietnam. So, four of them already passed away and I still have two more Master...Masters that I learn with them regularly. I still am taking lessons with them because they are just like archive of music and culture and also life experience because they can, they can share with me knowledge and things and events that happened way before I was born. So, sometime I feel like it's just like they provide me a time machine to go back in time to learn more about my root and time that I don't know. So, in that way I have to say that playing traditional music is a joy for me because it's not only helped me to express my emotion and my thinking, it's helped me to learn more, it helps me to be friends with and to work with artists from different cultures - it takes me to different countries. And to a very personal level, because of the traditional music, that is why I met my husband and that is why now I am here in America because I met him in one of my first concert tour in America in 1995. And so, after 5 years we married. So...so I think it is something very special to me.

SM: That's so lovely...

VV: Thanks.

SM: I'm happy to hear that. Well, I don't have any more questions for you. Ariana, do you have anything else you'd like to say, or ask?

AW: Probably, but I feel like we're out of time.

SM: Right, Yeah. Wow, thank you so much, Vân-Ánh. I really appreciate you being here with us and sharing your experience and knowledge and stories with us. It's been very beneficial and enlightening, so again, thank you so much.

VV: Thank you.

AW: Thank you.

SM: And hopefully, hopefully when all this is over you will be in LA soon and I'll definitely be at one of your shows.

28:30

VV: Yes, I'm very much looking forward to do that. There's a number of ways that we can do and like, we didn't have time to talk about it, mention about it, but I mean, um, you know I like I said to...to know about one culture it doesn't just come from the music and art, it comes from food and language as well. So, I even develop a show that I do my own cooking recipe and then talk about music and play music. So, I really hope that I can do that in LA sometime soon. Yeah, but I have done that many, many times and every time is just such a joy to...to see how people discover our culture in that way, you know like, you go in full circle.

SM: Wow. So, is the food component part of the community workshop sometimes? Or is this a new idea...

VV: Yeah, sometimes I do, yeah...

SM: That's amazing.

VV: Sometimes I do that. Because, you know like, all the Vietnamese way of cooking is very much reflects...the culture, just like the ways that we have the music in the left hand of the musician's play on the instruments. So one move one different way of vibrato or slide or, you know, our way of left hand, left hand only, will take you to different music...different genres, subgenres I mean, because we have 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam divided into three different regions, and so we have so many different music genres and subgenres. And so the left hand will have to reflect that. And also because of the language, we're at...the tone language...so we have six different tones. So, if we to change or raise our voice up and down it can be from one very nice meaning word into a disaster, to insulting words that you can have.

SM: Wow.

VV: So, you know, so that's why it go back to the left hand expression of our music. It has to be super careful and you have to know what you really want to say with the left hand. And in food, is the same thing. We use a lot of different herbs that is so much more than Japan or on the...or China or Korea. So, it's different...if everything is the same but you change the herbs you change the region of the food where it come from. So, all of that together so, that's why I think that, what I have to and...the first thing in my life I love is music and then cooking and then interior designs. So, I think that okay then I have to do that, you know, cooking and music at the same time.

SM: That's so cool.

VV: You're welcome.

SM: Yeah, 'cause I agree, I'm from Mexican descent so a huge component of our whole culture is food and music, and we love putting that together. It lets everyone know exactly who we are and what we stand for. So, that's amazing. I can't wait. I can't wait.

VV: Okay, yeah and then...I think that... I don't know when we will meet again or cross paths, but to both of you whenever you think that you need from Vietnamese music and culture even if you plan to go to travel in Vietnam you should let me know. I will let, you know, I can help you and I can give you pretty good advice where to go, what to do, and you know, where you can do kind of "underground" things.

SM: Alright, Ariana, we gotta plan something.

AW: I know, right? Thank you, that sounds amazing.

SM: Yeah, thank you.

VV: And then, I do look...I do encourage people to write music for me too. So, not only just, you know, I play people's music as well. And I love that because, again, the same topic that we can think that it's like just a rain sound, right, but we all experience so different. So, I want to know what you think, what other people think, and I want to try it out. So, if you ever think of, you know, writing something or have...ideas, or want to write for my instruments, let me know.

SM: Definitely. Thank you so much for the invitation.

VV: Okay, so I don't know what else I can do for today, or help for today.

SM: I think, I think we've...we've got it covered. We'll definitely be sending you extra materials just so you could see what we're doing, and before we post everything on the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive. But this has been such a pleasure.

VV: Thank you, me too.

SM: Thank you, I really appreciate it.

VV: Okay, okay so you two take care and be well. Be healthy. The vaccine is very close already so, don't get sick, okay especially this time. And then hope to see you in the future, or anytime okay?

SM: Likewise.

AW: Thank you so much.

SM: Thank you, have a great day.

VV: Bye bye.

SM: Bye bye.